

# **Group Home StepUp Project: Moving Up & Out of Congregate Care**

## **Final Report**



### **Alameda County Children & Family Services**

With Assistance from  
Casey Family Programs &  
California Permanency for Youth Project

August 2005

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### Page

3	Executive Summary
5	Introduction
7	The Human Element
10	Twelve Vignettes
23	Project Design
26	StepUp Project Trees
28	Outcomes
30	Financial Analysis
33	Lessons Learned
35	Findings & Recommendations

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Group Home Population

- In 2005, over 400 Alameda County foster youth reside in Group Home Care- representing from 12-15% of our total foster care population.
- Though Group Home care is intended to provide short-term treatment and structure, too many foster youth spend their entire adolescent years residing in multiple group home settings and do not return to family placements.
- Unfortunately, the majority of these youth lose family, peer, and school connections and are likely to emancipate from the system without any permanent, life-long connection.
- Outcomes for this population are amongst the worst for dependent children placed in out of home care.

### The Project

- The department invested 6 CWW's, embedded in the two Group Home units.
- Casey Family Program invested 1 social worker to support the project.
- The department arranged to receive technical assistance from the CPYP initiative to add structure to project.
- The Project commitment was for 6 months (January – July 2005).
- The Project set out to answer the following questions:
  - Do all these youth need to be in Group Home care?
  - If not, are there alternative placement options?
  - If not via traditional placements- FFA, county foster home- is there family available?
  - With the investment of these staff, can we produce better outcomes for these youth?
  - Will the financial investment of additional staff be cost neutral, or produce savings?
  - If successful, should we institutionalize this practice? Are there other structural changes the department needs to make regarding our practices around group home care?

### The Human Element

- The essence of this project was the human element, primarily the story of the foster youth whose future trajectories were changed forever
- Twelve detailed vignettes are included in the body of the report
- In addition to the impact this project had on foster youth, so did it move the staff involved

### Project Success

- 72 youth assigned to project (60 initially, then 12 in a second wave), approximately 10 per worker at a time- as secondary support to primary Group Home CWW
- Focus on case mining and web-based search technology for family
- StepUp staff bridged new relationships, focusing not on placement, but on family connections
- After 6 months- 19 youth placed out of group home care with family, including reunifications and discovery of fathers that had been listed as “whereabouts unknown” in the children’s records
- 17 more youth slated for placement with family in the next 1 to 3 months
- Only 2 of these placement successes were achieved through traditional means, via finding FFA or county licensed foster parents. Parents, Relative and Fictive Kin are the primary placement successes
- 12 youth intentionally remain in congregate care, progressing in treatment, in large part supported by the (re)connection with family now involved in treatment and visiting youth in care
- A surprisingly high number of youth were connected with family previously unknown to the youth. Additionally, a high number of youth were re-connected with family members estranged after many years in the system

### Findings

- The project was more successful than anticipated.
- Success was almost exclusively due to placement with parents, relatives, and fictive kin- not with FFA and county foster parents, as originally speculated
- There are many youth in Group Home care who don’t need to be- as there are family out there willing to make a permanent commitment to care for them
- Many of the youth’s behavioral trouble subsided when connected to family
- Not all youth were moved out of group home care, but connection to their often estranged family while in treatment was still a positive outcome
- Partnership with Group Home providers, Mental Health and other service providers is critical
- The project exposed system issues that unintentionally contribute to the number of youth that remain in group home care, and the department is developing ways to change the way we care for youth in congregate care
- A detailed financial analysis shows that continued investment in this effort is fiscally beneficial

## INTRODUCTION

In Alameda County, over 10% of the foster care population reside in Group Home Care. Group Home care was designed to provide structure and treatment to seriously emotionally and behaviorally challenged youth. For some youth, their placement in group home care is for this intended purpose, and the intervention is successful. However, for the vast majority of these youth, group home care has become a placement option due to lack of other resources.

Too many of these youth remain in group home care for the duration of their time as a foster youth while the treatment and structure provided does not result in any improvement and often results in a regression in behaviors. Additionally, the outcomes for this population are amongst the worse in the system. For example, these youth tend to experience more placement disruptions, more periods of time AWOL, more periods of time out of school, more time in psychiatric hospitals and juvenile detention facilities, and have higher incidents of poor emancipation outcomes such as adult incarceration, homelessness, graduation and GED rates.

In response to these disproportionately dismal outcomes, the department invested 6 Child Welfare staff to participate as non-case carrying social workers in the two Group Home case management units for a 6 month period (January – July 2005) to review these cases to see if better outcomes could be achieved. The Bay Area Casey Family Program also added support by committing one social worker to the project. Finally, the department focused technical assistance provided by CPYP (California Permanence for Youth Project) to provide structure and a known model of finding family for foster youth without permanence.

The Department hoped that the project would answer some important questions:

- *Do all these youth need to be in group home care?*
  - *Do these youth have family out there who may want to provide support to these youth? Do we already know about these family members, perhaps somewhere in our files from years back, or are there family members yet to be discovered?*
  - *If we connect these youth with family- will they still require GH placement? Will behaviors that may have led to GH placement continue, or will they subside when connected to family? Will these family members be interested and offer to be caretakers and permanent connections to these youth?*
  - *If we devote staff who would otherwise carry a caseload to this project, will it be cost-neutral or provide a savings to the Agency?*
  - *If successful, should we institutionalize this practice? Are there other structural changes the department needs to make regarding our practices around group home care?*
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**In summary, the project was more successful than anticipated!**

This report will elaborate upon the executive summary. It will discuss the human element of this project—the life stories of children residing in Group Home care whose future trajectories have been forever changed for the better because of this project.

Additionally, this report will present the outcomes for children and families who participated in the project, the program design, a financial analysis comparing the costs of the project to the savings—both with the current funding system and a capped allocation system—and lessons learned with a summary of findings and recommendations.

## THE HUMAN ELEMENT

It is important to present the children and families who were involved in this project. From the perspective of our client, the foster youth and their families, the urgency of the issue at hand is obvious. Being a part of the system responsible for addressing the needs of this population and to have seen so many poor outcomes is a reality for Group Home staff.

With years of pessimism about being able to impact this seemingly intractable issue, many in the project did not anticipate the level of success actually attained. This success was a very satisfying component of the project for the staff involved. However, an unanticipated emotion for staff was that with each success came the reminder that without this project, these youth would have continued on their trajectory of continued group home placement, estranged from family. It served as a reminder that there is potential to do better, even with a population arguably given up on by some.

In the next section are vignettes with detailed stories for 12 of the youth who participated in the project. A brief summary of some of the successes and how they were obtained follows.

Though these stories vary a great deal, the thread that runs through them would seem to be the loneliness that dominated these clients' lives. We began to see that the youth were deeply affected by not possessing the greater sense of identity that comes from being a real part of a functional family. We saw that our youth struggled to get by in institutionalized settings in which rotating staff took care of their primary needs for shelter and food without supplying a necessary sense of belonging and without giving them reassurance that they would have at least once consistent adult to turn to as they matured into adulthood.

While it was often the case that the project's youth presented with a myriad of maladaptive behaviors and often with emotional and psychiatric dysfunction, it was becoming clear that treatment alone, in the vacuum created by the absence of family, was not the prescription for stepping out of congregate care.

From the beginning of the project, the group home social workers all suspected that there were a great many of their clients who had outgrown the need for congregate care. They had come to see that these youth had gotten stuck, both emotionally and physically in these homes, with transition to regular foster homes an unlikely avenue of exit.

With the burden of typically high case loads and no routine exit strategies, our social workers felt powerless to do the work necessary and appropriate to return these youth to more viable living situations. While many of the clients were able to lead functional lives in group home care, just as many were seen to be acting out their loneliness and isolation in self-destructive ways. Great kids were seen

to be involving themselves in dangerous behaviors, including prostitution. Self-destructive and self-sabotaging behavior in the form of drug use, poor school performance and truancy, and aggravated peer conflict abounded.

We commenced the StepUp program with great hopes and, with this vantage point, see that our hopes were not unfounded. While we would have liked to have had even more time and resources, we are encouraged by the success with which our efforts have been met. While it would be unrealistic to expect all our clients' maladaptive behaviors to resolve overnight, we have seen a wide range of examples of clear and substantial improvement in our clients' lives.

Following are examples of success with four youth:

- A lesbian adolescent, inveterately running away from placements, more than casual drug use and truancy, has found in her new relationship with her biological father, whose whereabouts had been unknown for years, a sense of belonging. The security and hope that came with connection enabled her to get back into school and resulted in cessation of the cutting behavior that previously characterized her most difficult feelings. This young woman has shown signs of hope and a sense of future orientation for the first time.
- A silent, depressed teen, was found to have been secretly visiting with her father and step-mother, often when suspended from school. She was able to reunify with her father who was found to be living a stable life with a new wife and home. He presumed he could not bring his daughter home because of a near-decade old petition for neglect.
- A young adolescent, in group home care and day treatment for years, longed to be returned to his previous foster parents with whom he continued to spend most holidays. When we found that this foster family's circumstances had changed, and when a family search found only an alleged father living in Florida, we pursued placement with a staff member at his high quality group home. The staff member was licensed through San Francisco County and our client was placed with her and her family, after a successful trial visit.
- A 16 year-old youth with a placement history that showed him moving to more and more restrictive residential treatment programs that prescribed several psychotropic medications to address his angry behaviors and emotional lability, was placed closer to an adult sister to facilitate family contact. Within weeks, relatives heard of his re-entry into the family circle and came forward to be a part of his life. An uncle who had provided respite care for our client as a toddler proved to share a strong connection with the youth. Our client is now placed with the uncle, his wife and 3 cousins. His medication needs have all but disappeared and it seems incredible that he is the same person who appeared to be moving towards an RCL 14 treatment facility just 6 months ago.



It could appear that most of the steps we took to place our clients back into the orbit of their families were common sense, good practice social work. However, the project gave us the time and other resources to take these steps. The realities of Group Home Child Welfare staff require constant triaging of attention toward case emergencies and court reporting requirements; all to the neglect of this common sense practice. Through the largesse of the Agency, 6 full time Child Welfare Workers were dedicated to this effort. In addition, they were able to receive training and assistance from Casey Family Programs and CPYP to develop and implement a unique model to serve the Alameda County group home youth.

The resources given to the project gave us the time to use the advanced technology to find family and press forward against the conventional wisdom that adolescents, especially those troubled youth who had spent time in group homes and residential treatment facilities, were difficult if not impossible to place.

We have come to believe that the involvement of family and/or non-related kin is the necessary ingredient to successful outcomes with this population. We cannot begin to mitigate the loneliness and lack of direction of our group home youth, cannot begin to solve the problem of how these youth survive beyond foster care, without the loving commitment of family.

To even better understand the success of this project included below are 12 vignettes, detailing the stories of project participants.

## Twelve Vignettes

### Niko

It took a few months, the focused efforts of several staff and two grandparents, the good-natured charm of a young boy, and some creative planning to get Niko's family together. The results of those efforts were monumental for this 12 year old boy.

Niko was 11 years old and had been placed in a group home for almost a year when Step Up CWW Monika met him. He came into care five years earlier on allegations of neglect, which was a result of his mother's struggle with substance abuse. Niko was a perfect candidate for the Step Up effort because he was not exhibiting any dangerous or severely self-destructive behaviors. Additionally, he often spoke of several siblings and other relatives with whom he wanted contact.

Most of his siblings were placed with relatives after they came into care, and many are not currently dependents. When Monika found out that Niko was the only child in the family living in a group home, she wanted to have a team meeting to discuss long term plans for Niko. She knew it would be difficult to arrange a meeting with all the family members since many of them are not currently involved with the Agency and may be hesitant to attend a team meeting.

In an effort to have the first family meeting be as fun and rewarding as possible, Monika and other staff decided to arrange a birthday party for Niko's upcoming 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. They arranged a party at the Casey Family Programs office by calling two grandmothers to get names and contact information for as many relatives as possible. They also hoped that the family would spread the word themselves that Niko was in a group home and wanted to have a party with his family.

The plan worked because 30 relatives showed up for the party, including both parents who Niko had not seen in a long time! At the end of the party, Niko said to the crowd that it was his "best birthday ever". After the party, staff gave him a photo album of pictures they had taken at the party. They also presented Niko with a guest book that had all the guests' contact information.

Niko gained so much in just a few hours: connection with relatives, feelings of being cherished and special that he had not experienced in years, and memories of the afternoon documented in a photo album and a guest book. Additionally, he also made one very special connection with his mother.

The staff were hoping that Niko could make connections at the party and begin to develop relationships with relatives other than his parents because Niko's dad was still actively abusing alcohol, and Niko's mom wasn't expected to attend

because her new baby was due the day of the party. By all accounts, Niko's relatives were not hopeful that his mother would be emotionally available to re-build a relationship with him while she was caring for a newborn infant.

As it turned out, mom didn't have her baby that day and came to the party. During a conversation with staff at the party, mom shared that she has been clean and sober, enrolled in a drug program, and doing all the items on her case plan even though she had not had much recent contact with her child or with the Agency. Nobody knows why she didn't contact the Agency, but she was going to parenting classes and consistently testing clean with her drug program. She also stated that she has relatives, including her mother, who were willing to support her efforts to reunify with Niko.

After the party, Monika verified that many relatives were willing to support the mother's reunification plan, and Casey Family Programs has offered services to support the family. They are also on the waitlist for Family Preservation services.

The past few months of reunification efforts haven't been all roses. For example, Niko is having a hard time with the new baby, and they have individual and family counseling appointments to deal with jealousy and confusion about his mother having a new baby when he was in a group home. However, they're both committed to the process of healing their relationship, and the current plan is to reunify Niko with his mother this summer.

Given the number of youth who enter group homes at a young age and never get placed in lower levels of care, it's likely that Niko would have spent the next 6 years in group homes. Now, he's going to be reunified with a mother nobody had considered an option for this boy until, by chance, she was able to attend his birthday party.

### **Tiffannie**

Tiffannie has had approximately 13 placements, including 6 group homes, and several runaway episodes since she was removed from the home of her mother due to neglect at the age of ten. At the time she came into care, the whereabouts of her father were unknown.

Tiffannie has a history that is not unlike that of many other gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning teenagers. She's had a series of self-destructive behaviors, including drug use, cutting, at least one hospitalization due to an overdose of someone else's psychotropic medication, runaway episodes and hanging out on streets late in evenings. She's enrolled in an alternative public school due to poor attendance. She also has a history of non-compliance with group home structure. She has the capacity to develop relationships with staff and other kids at the group home but not at school.

Tiffannie was referred to the Step Up project because she talked about having relatives who could possibly be more supportive than Tiffannie's current relationships with adults. She has maintained a relationship with her mother and sees her once a week, usually when Tiffannie is hanging around public parks. Tiffannie's mother is not appropriate for reunification because she's frequently homeless and an active drug user.

Ann, Step Up CWW, did an internet search for relatives and found a few maternal half-siblings and Tiffannie's father, who has been drug-free for six years. Tiffannie's father was also a foster child (placed at Fred Finch Youth Center at one time) after a failed adoption. He has had 8 children, including Tiffannie, and has regular contact with the other seven children.

Just weeks before Ann found Tiffannie's father, he had incidentally been contacted for child support and requested a paternity test. When he found out that he is her father, he wrote to the court and stated he wanted to pay support for all his children. He requested help from the court to get in touch with Tiffannie so that he could get her out of a group home. He wrote, "I was raised without parents and know the path of group home experiences. Please help."

At first, Tiffannie wanted contact with her two maternal siblings and not her father. She later agreed to an initial meeting with him. During the first meeting, they talked for over an hour getting to know each other. The father set appropriate boundaries and shared stories of his history and how he's changed his life. He told stories of the things he learned from different caretakers and placement settings. He shared family photos and gave her some pictures of her siblings. He apologized for not being a part of her life earlier and was actively engaged in learning about her life.

During the conversation, she came out as a lesbian. Tiffannie asked her father, "do you have a problem with that?". His response was probably one of the most affirming she had ever received. He simply stated, "No, as long as you're safe and happy, that's all that matters."

On the way home from the visit, Tiffannie was excited about getting to know her dad and wants to continue to develop a relationship. On the way home, she called her girlfriend and said "everything's going to be ok", showing signs of hope and sense of future-orientation for the first time in a long time.

### **Robert**

Robert was removed at birth from substance abusing parents and subsequently removed from his adoptive mother who, for the first five years of his life, abused him by hitting him with a cane and locking him in a dog cage in the basement.

Between the ages of six and fourteen, Robert was placed in at least two foster homes and four group homes. He finally settled down at his seventh placement, a group home where he's been for four years. He lives on a ranch and developed a strong passion and talent for horsemanship. Over the past few years, he has gained enough knowledge of management and care of horses that he became a master horseman this past year at the age of seventeen.

Robert was referred to the Step Up project because he was going to emancipate within the year with very few adult connections. While he is definitely one of the motivated teens who will emancipate with specialized skills, he didn't have the mentorship and familial connection every child needs and deserves.

When Step Up CWW Ann first met Robert, he seemed so lonely. During their first meeting, he said "I've got nobody, nobody who's kin to me." He especially wanted to find his birth mother. The project staff found out that she was deceased as of last summer. Robert was sad and also relieved to have an answer about her whereabouts.

In addition to the information about his birth mother, Ann also found his birth father (who has been clean and sober and gainfully employed for many years) along with about 36 other relatives, most of whom expressed a strong interest in getting to know their newfound family member.

On his father's side of the family, he has so far met all five older siblings including a brother who recently was in the bay area on military leave from his station in Iraq. His older sister and her children have driven down from Reno on several occasions to visit.

Most of his maternal relatives live in the south. Robert sent some pictures of himself with his siblings to a couple of aunts. He received a letter in response from his maternal Aunt Shellie from Mississippi with details about his birth mother and several maternal relatives who are currently living in the south. Aunt Shellie wrote "I know the family would love to get together and meet all of you...Its okay we are strangers now but we can start now trying to make up for lost time." Robert is now making plans to go to the south with his older sister Natasha to meet his mother's relatives and get to know his four younger brothers and sisters there.

His father's family has given him a photo album with several photos. He now has photos of himself together with his biological family. According to group home staff, Robert "walks on clouds these days." One of them told Ann that seeing the change in Robert is like "watching a miracle unfold."

## **Nicholas**

Nicholas had been living with his legal guardian (paternal grandmother) since he was 15 months old. When he was 13, however, she could no longer care for him as he became an adolescent and voluntarily brought him to the Agency. He was placed in a group home where he had been for over three years when he was referred to the Step Up project.

Nicholas was never interested in school even though he attended regularly. He was more interested in after-school vocational programs and ILSP. He had a job as a maintenance worker at a recreational center through the ILSP job placement program.

In the group home environment, he was isolated and quiet. He did not make friends easily with the other teen boys in the home. The group home provider never complained of any serious behaviors or mental health concerns. He seems to be the kind of teenager who displays occasional, age appropriate, rebellious behavior, and did not require group home level care for three years, if he ever required it at all.

The Step Up CWW, Yi, was asked to explore a number of potential placement options for Nicholas, and none of them worked out. His mother has a history of substance abuse and father has history of sexual molest of Nicholas' family. Nicholas speaks to his mother on the phone occasionally for holidays and never speaks with his father. His paternal grandfather and his wife weren't able to take Nicholas because his wife's health is failing. Paternal grandmother was not able to reunify with him because she takes care of an adult son who has a serious mental illness. Yi also interviewed a paternal aunt and her husband, however, they were not able to care for Nicholas, even with support services, because they have two pre-adolescent children and weren't able to take in a nephew.

After all of the options had been explored, Nicholas made a request: "After 3 years of living in a group home and visiting relatives only once or twice or month", he asked, "can I be placed closer to my family if I can't be placed with them?"

After an extensive foster home search, there was only one home that would consider a 17 year old boy from a group home who was unlikely to graduate high school. After he met with the foster mother and the other two foster children, they all decided that it was a good match, and he was placed very shortly after their first meeting.

After a few months in the placement, he's much more engaged with his peers. Nicholas' self-esteem has begun to improve. He feels like a leader in the household and a role model for the younger boys. He has applied for summer jobs in Oakland through Project HOPE and has been referred to Alameda County

ILSP. He hopes to find a part-time job, attend ILSP, and emancipate to transitional housing next year.

### **Monika**

Monika was 17 years old and four months pregnant when she was referred to the Step Up project. She was in a group home that specializes in emancipating youth and doing well there, however, she would be unable to stay after her baby was born. She was referred to the Step Up project in an effort to prevent Monika from moving to another group home. Additionally, she needed assistance in developing a support system to rely on after the birth of her child.

Monika had been visiting an older sister and her young niece on the weekends. The primary CWW wanted the Step Up staff to assess the sister as a source of support and possible placement. When the Step Up CWW visited the home, she quickly recognized that Monika had already discussed placement with her sister.

Neither Monika nor her older sister had approached the primary CWW about placement because nothing seemed to ever work out for Monika. She didn't believe that moving out of a group home setting, especially now that she was pregnant, would be possible. Like so many teenagers who have been disappointed by countless adults in their lives, she had a hard time accepting assistance from project staff who wanted to facilitate a relative placement. In fact, when a staff member arrived at the scheduled time to pick up Monika and take her to her sister's house after the home was approved, she hadn't packed any of her clothing because she didn't believe that she was really moving!

Monika has now been placed with her older sister and young niece for four months. Her baby was born one month premature. However, the baby seems to be in good health now. Monika's sister helps her with parenting and encourages her to continue her high school education. Her sister is currently a student at Chabot College and they take BART together in the morning so that Monika can attend the Burke Academy for parenting teens. She plans to graduate in 2006 and has an open invitation to stay with her sister.

### **Michael**

Michael had been in the same group home since he came into foster care eleven years ago at 4 years old. He came into care due to his parents' substance abuse and general neglect. Both parents are currently deceased. Michael considers the group home owners to be his grandparents, and he has been placed there with his older brother for over ten years. Michael has refused any previous effort to introduce him to foster homes or other settings. The group home is a small

family business and a lower level of group home care, and it's the only home setting Michael remembers.

He never had serious behavioral concerns. Yet he also never reached his potential. Social workers and group home staff had been told that he could be getting higher grades and qualifying for more challenging courses if he put a little effort toward developing his talents. Michael always seemed to be one of those children who didn't take much of the social worker's time and had a unique charm. He's one of those foster children who too often hasn't gotten the preventive or proactive assistance he could benefit from due to all the crises and other demands on staff time. He was referred to the Step Up project when he mentioned to his CWW that he might be ready to consider a change after his brother moved to a foster home.

He had occasionally been visiting a non-related family friend in Antioch for several years. She was not available for placement because she has her hands full with her own teenager and full time job. However, Michael eventually began spending time with her sister and sister's husband who live in the same neighborhood. They have no children and enjoyed spending time with her sibling when Michael was on a visit. He now considers them both to be his aunts.

He is scheduled to be placed with his aunt this summer and looks forward to being the only child in the home after living with five other boys. The caretakers have been committed to helping Michael develop his interests and providing activities for him. When Michael said he was interested in developing musical talents, they agreed to get a musical instrument for him and look forward to enrolling him in music classes. Michael will be able to enjoy a family home with individualized attention for his high school years.

### **Kayanna**

Kayanna has been placed in two foster homes, four group homes, and two relative homes over the past 8 years since she was removed from her mother's home at the age of nine due to mother's substance abuse and neglect. Some of these placements lasted less than one month. Many times, Kayanna had to move from placements due to behavioral concerns. She was defiant, truant, disrespectful to adults, and verbally abusive to her great grandmother and other caretakers.

Most recently, she was moved to a group home after a very brief stay with her maternal great grandmother. Kayanna had been successfully improving her behavior at a group home, so she and her younger sister were placed together with their relative. After nine months, Kayanna had to move again and she was placed in another group home where she's been for one year.



She was referred to the Step Up project because her family relationships haven't provided the type of mentorship and guidance she requires. Her mother was incarcerated at the time she went into her current group home, and the identity of her father remains unknown. Although Kayanna used to AWOL from the group home to go to her maternal great grandmother's house where she finds support, their relationship is strained. Therefore, Kayanna is 17 years old and was on track to emancipate soon with few healthy family connections.

When Kayanna identified a part time staff member at her group home as a mentor and a role model, the primary CWW, Carmen referred her to the Step Up project to assess the relationship between Kayanna and the staff member. Carmen met with the staff person who shared her desire to provide a home for Kayanna outside of a group home setting. Even though she is employed part-time, the group home requires that staff members terminate their employment if they develop mentoring or familial relationships with children, especially if they plan to care for the child as a foster parent when the child is ready to move. The staff person already has a second job and is willing to terminate her employment to provide a home for this lonely teenager.

Kayanna's mentor was reminded of how important role models are for children when the teen's behavior started improving as a result of doing activities together. Kayanna started to feel hopeful when she knew someone cared about her. Carmen noticed a drastic change in her demeanor as well. Initially, Kayanna was very distant, and gave Carmen one-word answers in response to questions. Now, she calls Carmen at least once a week and relies on her for support as she plans for a possible transition to moving from the group home.

It turns out that Kayanna's mentor is already providing a home to another Alameda dependent as a non-related extended family member. The two teen girls have gone on outings together and get along well. She is also trying to get certified as an FFA foster parent. Carmen knew Kayanna was going to require extra support to make any placement successful so the FFA services were going to be essential.

Carmen talked to the other child's CWW who agreed that the other teenage girl is stable and has improved much of her behavior. She also confirmed that the caretaker sets appropriate boundaries and is a good role model for young women. She's firm and caring. Hopefully, Kayanna will be able to move this summer before school starts in the fall.

### **Jesse**

Jesse was removed from his mother's care due to neglect when he was eight years old. When he entered foster care, he had not been to school in over six months. His mother and presumed father received family reunification services for

18 months without successful reunification. He and his mother have maintained irregular visitation, but he lost contact with his presumed father and other relatives.

Jesse lived in four FFA placements in the first year and a half after he was removed from his mother's home. When he and his sister were placed together in a foster home, the foster parent reported that Jesse was excessively defiant and was verbally and physically abusive toward his sister. For the past year, he's been in a high-level treatment facility.

Jesse was referred to the Step Up project in an effort to locate relatives, especially any from his father's side. Jesse had almost no healthy family connections. He had not been told anything about his biological father and until recently has had no contact with him. Mr. Dixon was in prison when Jesse was born, and Jesse's mother named another man on Jesse's birth certificate.

Step Up project CWW, Ann, located Jesse's father and paternal grandmother in Arkansas. When Mr. Dixon said how happy he was to have contact with Jesse and looked forward to learning about his life, Ann sent him a photo of Jesse and asked him to send a letter to share with his son.

Mr. Dixon received the photos that Ann sent and returned a letter to forward to Jesse. When Ann gave the letter to Jesse he asked "This is a letter from my real dad?" His father wrote, "What grade are you in and how are you doing in school? Do you play any sports? You can call me anytime. I will be looking forward to hearing from you real soon." The pictures below show Jesse holding the envelope with that first letter from his father and then smiling after he read the letter. The CWW is planning a visit as soon as possible.

According to Ann, life seems to make more sense to Jesse now. His behavior has improved, and he has recently moved to a lower level of care much closer to his family. While placement with relatives is not possible right now, Jesse feels supported by them and looks forward to being able to visit his mother, sister, and assumed father more frequently again now that he is placed closer to them. He also looks forward to meeting his biological father and grandmother for the first time.

## **Denise**

Denise came into care when she was 11 months old because her parents were unable and unwilling to care for her special needs. She tested positive for cocaine and opiates at birth, and both parents were actively using when she came into care.

Both dad and mom received Family Reunification services. Denise didn't successfully reunify with either parent, and she was placed with her maternal

great aunt for almost twelve years until she was brought back into care due to physical and verbal abuse. Unfortunately, many placements dissolve when the child reaches adolescence. And, at the age of 13, Denise entered a group home.

Over the past three years, Denise has been placed in a foster home and two group homes. She was initially placed in a group home because she was getting suspended from school for fighting with kids and generally demonstrated an argumentative/combatative style of relating to other teenagers.

Apparently, when she came back into foster care at the age of 13, the Agency did a search for both parents. Denise's father responded to the Agency's contact attempts and stated that he wanted a relationship with his daughter. The Court approved unsupervised visits. As Denise moved through the dependency process, and therefore through several different social workers, it appears that her relationship with her father was never monitored or evaluated as a possible reunification. Denise and her father were successful in building a relationship with little Agency support.

In fact, Denise was referred to the Step Up project because her CWW found out that she had been spending almost every weekend with her father and his wife. The group home providers had not supported a more extensive visitation pattern or reunification plan, so Sherri, the Step Up worker, was asked to interview the family and the group home staff to determine if reunification might be an appropriate plan.

Sherri visited the father and Denise in his home. At that visit, they both stated they wanted to reunify and had been building their relationship for several years. Although there were barriers to their reunification, there were also support services available. For example, dad is on methadone maintenance through Watson Wellness Center, and they confirmed that he is compliant with their program. The family was also referred to Parental Stress EPSDT transition services.

The group home continued to report that Denise's behavior was not improving, and they were concerned about her school performance. The staff also reported that they didn't support the reunification efforts, especially since she would have to change schools. However, the family and the Agency saw things differently. Four months after Sherri first met with Denise and her father, Denise went home for a trial visit. Since the visit went well, the Court authorized placement with the father.

She has been living with him for over a month and doing well so far. Dad takes Denise to school everyday and is engaged in her progress. Denise's father and step mother are active participants in their child's life, and they seek help and guidance in raising a teenager. While it's true that her behavior wasn't

improving, it also wasn't escalating. Perhaps with the support of loving parents, Denise will make different choices.

### **Dashawn**

Social workers and group home staff never really got to know Dashawn because she didn't stay in one place very long and no intervention seemed to reach her. She was running away and engaging in self-destructive behaviors from a very young age. There was one person, however, who caught her attention and didn't give up.

When she was twelve years old, Dashawn was removed from the home of her legal guardian, with whom she had been living since she was two years old, due to physical abuse and the inability of the guardian to care for Dashawn.

Within the next two years, she was placed in two foster homes and four group homes. Dashawn ran away from most of these placements, and spent almost as much time AWOL as she did in her placements. She has a history of prostitution, poor school performance, and very little contact with her family.

She was referred to the Step Up project because she had identified a staff member at her middle school as someone she wanted to be placed with. She had run away from her placement and was informally staying with the school staff person as a safe place to get a night's sleep and some food when Riva, Step Up CWW, met her.

Riva went to visit the home of the potential caretaker and was impressed with the level of care and attention she was giving Dashawn. The caretaker has a daughter who is also 14, and the girls are getting along very well. Additionally, Riva did a search for relatives, and it was one of the shortest lists that she had seen. None of the few people who showed up were appropriate family connections for Dashawn. It seemed as though the school staff person was the only adult connection Dashawn had made, and the Agency wanted to support it as much as possible.

Dashawn has been living with her mentor for almost six months now. She has not run away once and is currently going to school. The social worker has not received any phone calls reporting self-destructive behaviors. Dashawn even went to a school dance for which her caretaker bought her a beautiful dress. She is participating in the home and at school in ways she hasn't in years.

Dashawn has shared her story with her caretaker about her history of trauma and behavior choices, and the caretaker has been helping to improve her self-esteem. Given her history of abuse, limited family contact, running away from placements, and the number of group home settings she's lived in, this might be

first experience Dashawn has had with building trust and effective parenting in quite a long time.

Many of the group homes report that teens like Dashawn are a waste of effort because they choose to run away and live on the streets, even get involved in prostitution. However, Dashawn made a connection, and the social workers were able to identify a potential confidante, mentor, and parent in the school staff person who really saw Dashawn as a child who was a trauma victim in need of some boundaries and tender loving care.

### **Ashley**

Ashley was removed from the home of her parents when she was five years old due to neglect as a result of her parents' substance abuse. Over the next seven years, Ashley was placed in eight different foster homes and three group homes. She used to pull her hair out due to anxiety and suffered from insomnia, crying spells, poor concentration, and other symptoms of severe childhood anxiety.

Ashley was referred to the Step Up project because a paternal aunt and uncle had been approved for placement. However, the primary CWW hadn't been able to provide enough support to the family to facilitate a successful placement after the home was approved. The family had four kids already, and the uncle is a long distance truck driver and not around much of the time. The aunt works part time outside the home, and they required support to take in a twelve year old from a high level treatment facility.

Ashley was ready to move from her group home. Carmen, the Step Up CWW, was able to provide the support she needed. Carmen met with the aunt and uncle who agreed that they wanted to care for their relative even though they had their hands full. They were clearly committed to Ashley and her family. She was placed there on a trial visit that went really well. She has now been there for over six months. Ashley is happy and engaged during visits with the social worker. Additionally, she is visiting her parents and brother more regularly because her aunt and uncle supervise and facilitate visits between Sacramento and Oakland.

In fact, Ashley's teenage brother is currently on a trial visit with the family because his visits at the aunt and uncle's house have been so successful. They support keeping the siblings together and are willing to bring him into their home as well.

As it turns out, this initially uncertain relative placement will likely turn into a permanent connection for Ashley and her brother. The aunt and uncle were reluctant to discuss legal guardianship or adoption because Ashley's uncle didn't want his brother's parental rights terminated. He also held some common misconceptions about the ability for the children to visit their parents after

guardianship or adoption. Step Up project and Court staff were able to address all of the caretaker's concerns. Now, all parties are in agreement that legal guardianship is the permanent plan for both children. If guardianship is granted, the family might move to Missouri so that the uncle can be a local truck driver and spend more time with the family.

### **Aaron and Tonya**

After their mother died about three years ago, maternal half-siblings Aaron and Tonya were released from Wisconsin Social Services to their only known relative, a maternal grandfather in Alameda County. Shortly after they arrived in California, their grandfather called Alameda County for assistance with the children. Aaron was getting into fights at school and struggled with depression. Tonya was experiencing extreme anxiety, rage, and social withdrawal.

Two years ago, they were brought into foster care, and within a few months of each other, they were placed at Lincoln Child Center, a high level treatment facility. Aaron is currently on Prozac, and was diagnosed with PTSD when he came into care. Tonya was having psychotic symptoms of hearing voices and her behavior was "bizarre, disorganized and assaultive" when she arrived at Lincoln. She is currently on psychotropic medication. They both have IEP's and special education needs.

They were referred to the Step Up Project after their therapists at Lincoln agreed that they were ready to move to a lower level of care. The therapists and staff reported that their behavior and demeanor changed positively after they were placed together there. So, their relationship to each other is important to maintain.

Initially, the plan was to return to their maternal grandfather's home, however, his health has been failing and he has been in the hospital for as long as a month with heart trouble. He eventually told the children that they were not going to be able to return to his house due to his health. Although he remains very interested in maintaining contact, the children have been distraught over their only known relative's inability to care for them.

When they were initially interviewed by the Step Up CWW, the children were both interested in finding their fathers and paternal relatives. Through internet searches, Monika was able to locate Tonya's father and paternal grandmother in Chicago. She found out that both children used to visit regularly for summer vacations. They were happy to locate the children and said that their relationship with the children declined years ago because their mother didn't facilitate visits. Recently, they wrote a letter and sent pictures to the children and are hoping for a visit.

## Project Design

The six-month project commenced with a sense of promise and urgency, knowing we'd been given the opportunity to do some very innovative work. Moreover, we perceived from the beginning that our work, if successful, would have a large and lasting effect on the lives of the children and adolescents in our charge.

The six Child Welfare Workers were embedded within the Agency's two large group homes units. They were given desks scattered among the units' social workers, which allowed for easy contact with the primary workers. We also had a desk near the CWW's for the Casey Family Program staff person.

There were 60 clients in the first wave of the effort and 12 in the second smaller wave. The clients were chosen for the project during a number of day-long case conferences in which the Group Home social workers presented the youths' cases to the StepUp project team, including Child Welfare Workers, Child Welfare Supervisors, and Casey Family Program staff. A consensus of opinion was formed as to who fit project criteria. Project social workers were then assigned no more than 10 clients with whom to work.

Our criteria were not strictly defined. However, with limited time and staff, we had to make decisions about who might benefit most and which were the neediest and loneliest children. In these case conferences, the team was able to choose the 72 children by focusing on the following characteristics:

- age of the child,
- length of time spent in congregate care,
- current level of functioning, and
- perceived need of the youth for a permanent connection to aid them in their treatment or their transition from foster care.

To each client's case we applied a model borrowed from the work of Kevin Campbell, our technical assistant and youth permanency expert. First, we embarked upon a discovery phase in which we used our knowledge of a case's history, a thorough review of the case file, and the services of USSearch.com, a major people finding website, to identify family members in the youths' extended family. We were advised by Kevin Campbell and other experts to cast our net as far as possible. Based on Kevin's experience, he advised that we could expect to find an average of 40 relatives for each child.

At this point we commenced an exploration phase in which we wrote, telephoned, and knocked on doors, seeking to engage these relatives and possible connections on behalf of the youth. We told the story of the client's life and shared that we were concerned that the child had lost touch with her or his family. We also extended ourselves to other important people in the youths'

lives, reaching out at times to a former foster parent, a favorite counselor, or the parent of a good friend.

After discovering and engaging family and other important adults in our client's lives, we moved to planning and decision making phases. In time, we found many placement possibilities, most of which grew organically from the family's concern that one of their relatives had been lost in foster care. Our role was to offer support, encouragement, and assistance in navigating the systems and securing support services.

The project team met weekly for organizational planning. The project was in a pilot stage of formation, and we needed to assess structural and strategic components. As we progressed, the weekly meeting provided more support functions, as we shared successes and brainstormed solutions to obstacles.

Every project worker was also given an hour of individual supervision each week by Child Welfare Supervisors. This hour was used to track and log the progress of each StepUp client. Additionally, the project team members were in continuous communication with their clients' primary social workers.

Every month the project met for two full-day sessions with our technical assistant, Kevin Campbell. Kevin came to us through the California Permanency for Youth Project. He grounded our work in the experience he has gained working with a great many jurisdictions in several states, focused on kinship practice and family finding. Kevin showed us how to work with a web based search firm and commence sophisticated explorations of a client's extended family. Kevin also provided us with a great deal of inspiration, born of his conviction that no child needs to be well enough to have a family and his belief that no system serves its clients well when it overlooks the need of children to be a real part of their family.

The project's Program Manager, Randy Morris, kept the effort on track, directing that we provide periodic progress reports to senior management. With the assistance of the Agency's Quality Assurance unit, we tracked for each client the number of family we'd connected or reconnected with, any placement possibilities that evolved through that contact, pre-placement services provided, Foster Family Association involvement and post placement services, including the application of a time limited special care rate for special needs cases.

In addition to the Technical assistance from our CPYP effort, the project enjoyed Casey Family Program contribution of a full time social worker, as well as the foundations administration support. Casey, in addition to being a very active national foundation with a local branch supporting many of Alameda county's efforts, is also a certified Foster Family Agency. As such, we also organized the project with the knowledge that recent clarification from the State (ACL 04-28) allows a County to place foster youth with relative and fictive kin with FFA certification in order to receive FFA services. Casey has many foundation-



funded services in addition to their FFA program. For those youth identified as most needing extra support during the transition from congregate care to family living, the Casey social worker embedded in the project was utilized to bridge this placement arrangement.

The project members also maintained an art project, a visual display of the project's progress. Four trees were made, having many branches, on which we drew the first names of our clients. Multicolored leaves denoted different people in our client's lives: previously known relatives, all the people the child said cared about them, newly found relatives, the family members actively involved in the child's permanency, and new found family homes for placement.

## StepUp Project Trees

When we first began the StepUp Project we constructed a visual representation of our progress in the form of a tree. This activity would help inspire us to hang in there through the inevitable periods of frustration when things didn't go as planned. Our four trees quickly sprouted branches, one for each of the children with whom we began our project. Then we added a blue leaf for each adult already known to the child and the primary CWW. While searching for new relatives, we revisited old relatives to see what if anything had changed in regards to their relationship with the child.



We also asked each child to name those people, related or not, who they felt really cared about them, and added a light green leaf for each. Our trees were now beginning to tell a story.

As we began our formal searches, we found relatives who had long since lost contact with the children. Many had overcome past problems and now wanted to be positive role models. Their stories helped fill missing gaps in the children's family histories. More of our children now had families to visit on weekends and holidays. They returned with treasured family photos. For each of those newly located family members, we added an orange leaf. Some children only had one or two orange leaves, but it only takes one person to make a major difference in the life of a child!



Several of these newly located folks made a commitment to continue to be a permanent person in their young relative's life. For each of those, we added a bright green leaf. Some of those green leaves are expected to turn purple, our favorite leaf color. The purple leaves on our final tree photo below represent placements that occurred as a result of our project.



## Outcomes

This section will outline the various outcomes for the 72 children and families with whom we have worked since January 2005.

At the formal close of our six-month project we have the following results for the 72 youth:

- 19 youth left group home care and were placed with relatives or fictive kin
- 6 pending placements for the month of August 2005
- 3 ICPC applications awaiting approval for out of state placement
- 8 youth connected to families, placement possible within the next quarter
- 4 older youth were placed in Transition housing programs, with concerted efforts to have family involved in the decision and supporting the placement
- 12 youth intentionally remain in congregate care with the decision that completion of treatment program is necessary; but now have actively involved family visiting and part of the treatment program.
- The remaining youth not represented in the tallies above include situations where more extensive family finding efforts continue and/or situations where family have been located but relationships are still being built with commitments to permanence or placement unknown at this time.
- Of the youth in placement, or anticipated to be; these 36 youth are now or soon to be placed in the homes of five parents, 24 relatives, five fictive kin and two foster families. Ten of these placements are supported by the services of Casey Family Programs or another Foster Family Agency.
- Only 2 placements were accomplished by traditional means- utilizing FFA caregivers previously unknown to the child. All other successes were obtained by finding family and solidifying fictive kin relationships.

As noted above, beyond the actual and anticipated placements, we have connected or reconnected an additional 12 of our project youth with family who can now support them while they remain in care. Several of the twelve are youth who are entering their senior year of high school and appropriately wish to remain in the schools and communities in which they have a great deal of personal investment. The others remain in residential treatment facilities because the project team determined that they require continued mental health services and supervision. We now actively promote the involvement of these found family members in these clients' treatment plans. We have no doubt that the family's participation will be a great asset to treatment. Many of these relatives will become permanent connections for the youth in the years ahead.

An important outcome of this project is the reminder that there is no magic bullet intervention that immediately eliminates the need for congregate care. Even the

dramatic success of this project saw some youth, as described above, who though dramatically happier and more grounded by connections with family, still remain very troubled and in need of treatment. The critical issue is the difference the involvement of committed family can make, even with the most troubled youth. We will see improved outcomes in well-being measures more than measures of placement type for these children. In time, we can assume that these family connections will lead to other better outcomes, including decreased placement disruptions, progress in treatment, success in school placements, and measures taken after emancipation.

Another important outcome of this project was the exposure that use of foster parent placement resources played almost no role in the projects success. Extensive efforts were made to create financial incentives in the form of special rates for county foster parents willing to commit to caring for youth moving out of congregate care. The Department's licensing staff was solicited to discuss this prospect with all potentially interested county foster parents. No placements were made with county foster parents, despite this effort. An expanded pool of newly recruited foster parents committed to caring for teenagers would certainly be an important addition to the pool of placement options for this population. However, this project exposed that family, in the form of parents, relatives, and fictive kin already connected to these youth, were where success was obtained.

Though we've accomplished much groundbreaking work in transitioning youth out of congregate care, we've also done the work of sowing the seeds of tomorrow's return to a home setting.

## FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Given the tremendous cost associated with Group Home placement, transitioning youth from Group Home care to Foster Family, Relative, or Parent placements presents the opportunity to achieve county savings.

Under the current Title IV-E funding environment, the county pays a share of cost on all Foster Care placements, 30% and 60% of placement costs for Federal and Non-Federal youth respectively. Thus, lower placement costs create lower county costs. Looking forward, as the county considers the possibility of entering into a capped IV-E allocation, the savings associated with reduced placement expenditures would allow the Agency to stabilize costs and direct resources to new initiatives in a flexible programmatic environment.

The fiscal savings discussed below are derived from StepUp placement data, which represent 36 youth who have had (or will soon have) a change of placement in the StepUp program as of July 2005. Of these 36 minors:

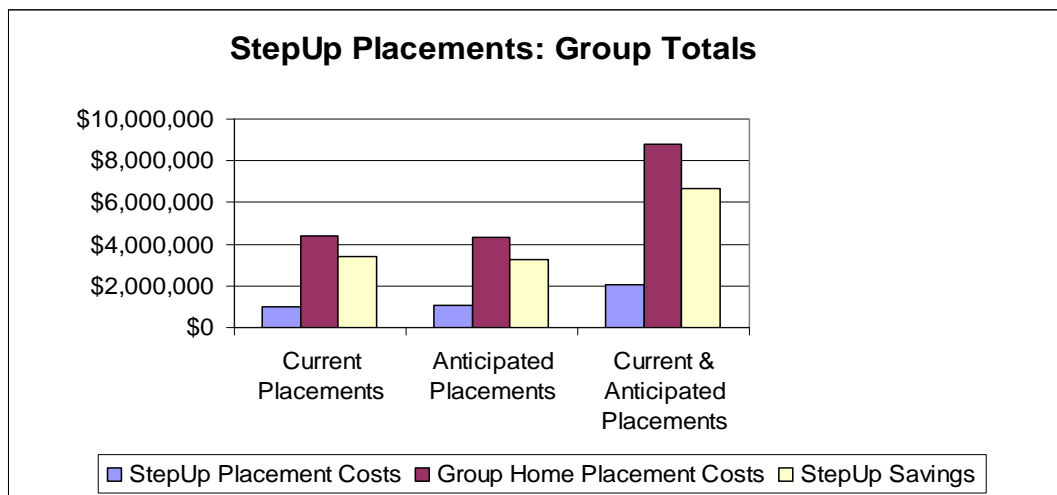
- 19 are currently in new placement
- 6 are pending and expected to be finalized by September 1, 2005
- 8 are expected to be in new placement over the next quarter
- 3 await ICPC approval for placement .

Considering the mix above, the youth were further categorized into "Current Placement" and "Anticipated Placement" groups for purposes of analysis.

In addition, the following monthly rates (average costs by placement type, based on review of average costs associated with each placement type) were used to calculate total and average cost estimates for current placement and anticipated placement groups:

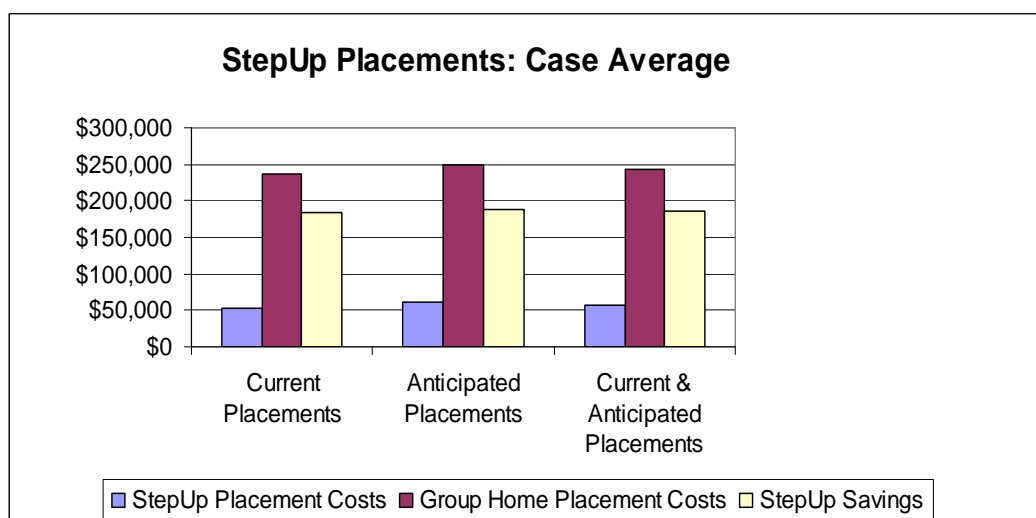
- Group Home: \$5000
- Foster Family Agency: \$2000
- Relative/Fictive Kin: \$1000
- Family Maintenance: \$0

New placement costs, current or anticipated, for youth in the StepUp program were projected against the cost of Group Home placement over time. For example, a youth 16 years of age is estimated to accrue about 2 1/2 years of placement payments before "aging out" of the system. If the StepUp program places this youth in Relative care, expenditures associated with 2 1/2 years of Relative placement average about \$30K whereas 2 1/2 years in Group Home placement would cost \$150K. The \$30K in this example contributes to the "StepUp Placement Costs," the \$150K contributes to the "Group Home Placement Costs," while the "StepUp Savings" captures the difference between the two projected expenditures in the graphs below.



Looking at the whole group, total StepUp Savings are estimated to be about \$6,672,000 over time, with respective savings of \$3.42 million and \$3.25 million associated with Current Placements and Anticipated Placements.

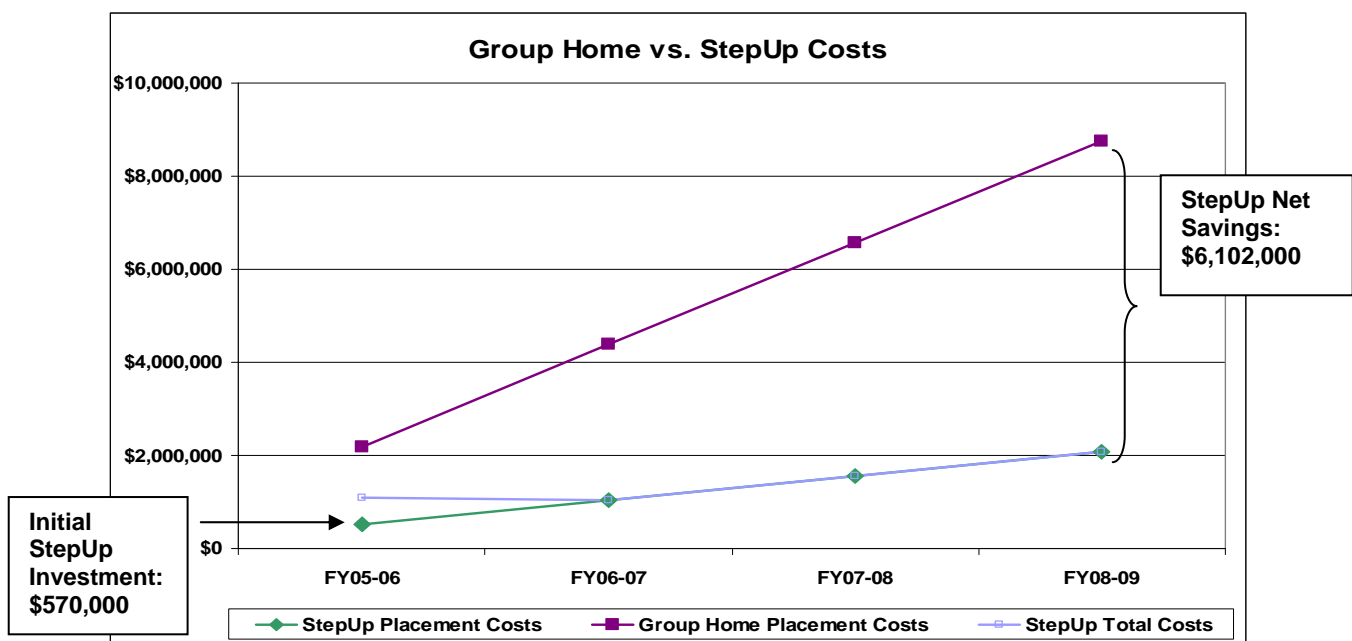
Average data indicate that a minor in the StepUp program is about 14 1/2 years old and is expected to remain in the system for 4 years before “aging out.” The average StepUp new placement cost is about \$1,167. Projecting this rate over the 4-year period, StepUp placement costs average \$57K whereas Group Home placement average \$243K. Thus, any one youth in the StepUp program that remains in the system until 18 1/2 will generate about \$186K of savings over time, or about \$46.5K per year.





Due to the one-time infusion of 6 staff devoted to performing searches, making family connections, and seeking placements, StepUp's success in achieving lower placement costs was captured in the first 6 months of the program.

While investment in additional staff resources involved an initial financial outlay of approximately \$570,000, which represents all salary and overhead costs during a 6-month period, the savings overtime far exceed the investment. **\*Over the 4-year timeframe, the StepUp program is projected to achieve a net savings of \$6,102,000.** The county share of this savings - after investing \$171,000 (the county share of the cost for staffing) – would be approximately \$2,270,952.



\*It is noted that there are some confounding variables in this analysis. On the one hand, should a youth placed with a relative now, be adopted prior to the 4 years projected above, the FC costs reduce even more over time. On the other hand, should a placement disrupt and a youth need to be re-entered into congregate care, these costs would increase.



## LESSONS LEARNED

We've learned many lessons over the past 6-months, some cautionary and some encouraging. During a number of team debriefing sessions and a rap up session with our CPYP consultant, Kevin Campbell, we came to some agreement about our common experience.

Our work taught us that occasionally the best looking, most supported placements will not work. Sometimes attachment issues, resurfacing from earlier trauma, inhibit the development of trust. Other times a youth will choose the seemingly easy freedom of the street over the security and structure of a family home.

The project demonstrated that some of our youth appeared appropriate for and ready to transition to licensed transitional living programs, as long as they had at least one adult who had a life-long commitment to the youth and their general welfare.

We were sobered to learn that some of our clients knew their family and extended family and had strong reservations about their relationship to their family group. For these youth we planned to develop and support sustaining relationships with other important people in their lives.

We learned that when sibling groups are separated by adoptions, legal guardianship and group home placements, it can be very difficult to reconnect those lives.

We all agreed that, while the vast majority of our youth who remained in congregate care could benefit from StepUp services, if we were required to triage we should probably refine our project criteria to take a two pronged strategy to best outcomes. We would begin by offering services to those children and adolescents most isolated from their family while concurrently engaging youth who seemed to no longer require congregate care and who needed kinship oriented placement services. Our goal would be to plot a timetable within which we would have performed family finding services for all group home youth (including AWOL youth) and engage all youth in congregate care in a discussion of what life after group home care would look like for them.

With the assistance of the Agency's Finance Department, we were able to incorporate a financial analysis into our investigation of the department's capacity to design an innovative program for these youth with multiple, and often expensive, needs. It seems apparent that projected long-term savings far outweigh the short-term costs of this project.

Our best lesson was that we could find families everywhere who cared deeply about the children who had been lost to them, who had dreams and hopes for

their young family members, and who were overjoyed to give of themselves to bring these children and adolescents close to them.

## **FINDINGS**

- This works! Over the course of 6 months time the StepUp project has effected real and permanent change in 47% of our focus population's lives.
- Nearly 100% have made new or renewed connection to family members, relationships that will improve treatment outcomes and lead to life-long support and inclusion into the community
- We have proof that many of our children not only do not belong in group home care, but also have stable and loving kin and fictive kin willing to provide them a home.
- We now know that CBO's can support these placements through the services of foster family agencies and mental health providers and that organizations such as Casey Family Programs have taken a keen interest in this service provision.
- Financial analysis shows that this is a sound financial investment, both in the current funding and environment, and certainly in a future capped allocation environment

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Our family finding success has convinced us that investing in searching for family and cultivating working relationship with these families is the key to success. Recruiting more foster parents for teenagers has been a solution touted for years as the remedy to this issue. This project shattered a myth of sorts, that due to lack of family resources, recruitment of foster parents willing to care for teens was by default the only alternative option. It is recommended that equal department attention be given to more thorough family finding efforts as a sequential first step in placement practice.
- Based on feedback from an adoption CWW, working with the project, the department should explore using family finding technologies and practices validated in the StepUp project to integrate into adoptions practice as well. It is particularly noted that the current "search" efforts for family used by the adoptions program are very limited given the new technologies and practiced methods used in the StepUp project
- Institutionalize controls for how and when children are placed in group home care as successful efforts to transition youth out of unnecessary established congregate care placements will only be back filled by new group home placements that are not necessary. Specifically, the project exposed a disturbing number of group home placements initiated many years prior as

“temporary,” but then the case was lost amidst others, and years later the youth has habituated to the group home culture and was estranged from many important family connections.

- One already existing control that is difficult to enforce in the department is the “conversion” procedures. In procedure- youth placed in emergency group home placements (or any emergency placement for that matter) are not to be “converted” to court approved long-term placement status without review and consideration by Long term placement staff. Past and current efforts to control conversion practice have been ineffective.
- It is critical that the department continue its dialogue with Group Home providers. 3 separate meetings have been held with Group Home providers discussing the department’s policy direction. Many Group Homes have changed their practices in response, but some have not. A strong partnership with Group Homes is an essential element for continued success